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HOW I LEARNED TO EAT A BANANA!

Alney Norell

My aunt Charlotte, was a woman of "stature" and courage. Personable, well-educated, well-motivated. She knew exactly what to do at the right time. She moved into the "thick of things" with authority and dispatch. Without hesitation or trepidation. She was a solver of problems. The snags and blockages of life held no hurdles for her! Sure of herself at all times, she was the person to turn to in a crisis. She was my mother's younger sister. Looking back, I can think of but one word to describe her: DYNAMO! She was THAT!

She attended a well-known "Finishing School" for Girls, where they excelled in teaching all the proper nuances and graces of society. But, that lack in *her* was small, for she was well-grounded in those things at home. But at school she did receive the necessary polish and pizzazz, to cope with the world of her day...which was just prior to World War I and a bit afterward. Instead of being a "shrinking violet"...by graduation she already knew the fine point of finding a job and on into a "position."

My aunt came out with flying colors! You could almost say she was a towering inferno of resolve and intentions, to make something of herself. Women of that era were not encouraged in that direction. They were, to be precise...set for wives and mothers. But not my aunt! She was an ACHIEVER! (WHEN THERE WAS NO ROOM FOR ONE!) She MADE ROOM! She made her presence felt, no matter where she was. Having talents, she was smart enough to know that charm and poise were needed also. She had a "good head on her shoulders," as the saying was. And, with her good heart...she really did accomplish a great deal. She had such an interest in LIFE and the people in it...that she earned the respect and affection she deserved. She was interested in every person...and, their story. Part of her charm was, being able to LISTEN!

She was "into" Education, with many innovations and improvements. Every summer she went to Europe. Though she was "different" in her approach to life and living...she easily made friends everywhere. And...they never forgot her! Foreign travel was her delight. Somehow she always seemed to be where the action was...Big EVENTS...Big Happenings!

She happened to be in England in 1911, when the giant ship The TITANTIC was being finished. Stories abounded, in the pure wonder of such construction and speed. (Soon to be proved!) This Super Ship was being built, for modern fast transportation. Supposed to be "UNSINKABLE!" My aunt was in a small group allowed aboard for a brief look, as the upperdecks were being laid. They had to tip-toe on board planks, picking their way to the dining salon, where huge crystal chandeliers were being installed. Aunt was fascinated...a THRILLING experience! She went at once to the White Star Line to book passage home. Of course, they had been sold-out for months. Since it was the maiden voyage, everyone had been scrambling, for space. No matter, she insisted to the official, that she would take a cancellation. He assured her, there would *BE NONE!* But, he finally took her name! And don't you think she *did* get called...there was a cancellation...and, it became *hers!*

"I was so overjoyed at the fact of *getting* a booking" she told my mother..."that the excitement almost killed me!" She managed to arrive in Southampton two days prior to sailing, so as to be part of the wild hurrah, and the prospect of going home on such a vessel! First thing in Southampton, she finagled a cab, for *SURETY*, on the sailing day. It was a tired old high-built motor car with a roof that held her luggage strapped on top. Some smaller pieces inside with her. All of a sudden she screamed: "Oh, my

goodness! My alligator dressing case is MISSING! Turn back!" The cabby tried to explain "Time-points," and how there was NO time to turn around and go back to the hotel...THEN GET BACK, for scheduled sailing. No use! Over-riding his suggestions... BACK they went! (Thereby, saving her life!) By the time they *DID return*, they could hear the last deep-throated HOOOT of the horns...as The TITANIC slipped her berth...headed for the open sea. My aunt was aghast! She could not believe it possible...that THIS had happened to her! What to do??? Yes, of course! She had the solution! She instructed the cabby to drive to the White Star Line Office. It took some doing, as the milling crowds and vehicles were caught in a vortex of traffic and hot tempers. Not my aunt! She was thinking what to say! To the pleasant official she exclaimed breathlessly: "The Captain pulled out AHEAD of time...and just left me standing there!" She was so upset that they gave her accommodations on the CARPATHIA, sailing a bit later...if that was agreeable? It was! And more luxe quarters? Agreed? Yes, indeed!

Of course we know The TITANIC rammed an iceberg in the North Atlantic, on the night of April 14-15, 1912. And the ship was so badly damaged...she sank! The CARPATHIA, was the rescue ship. There again, was my aunt...in the midst of the BIGGEST Happening of her life! A night of heroic ACTION! of tragedy and panic! Aunt Charlotte was among the first to offer her stateroom, to oncoming rescued TITANIC passengers. All of them sopping wet, scared and some in shock. She was very busy, all that rescue night.

Though I was not born when all this took place, I did hear it first-hand from my aunt and mother...at a very early age. This was the background for my "education" in New York City...Several years later, I waited at the Plaza Hotel for my aunt to return from her latest European jaunt. She would then take me to a girls' boarding school out west.

We were living in Indianapolis at the time, but my aunt had arranged, before she left for the summer...all details of my tuition, and the necessities pertaining, thereto. She had button-holed an uncle, telling him he HAD to be responsible for getting me on the train in Indianapolis, handing me over to the Conductor, with my ticket clutched in a tiny purse I carried. She bought a Lower Berth, so that if I had to get up at night... I would not fall from the Upper Berth ladder and break a leg. She certainly covered all the bases...thinking of everything.

She also instructed the Plaza Hotel to send a "Nanny" or other responsible person to Grand Central Station, pick me up, flag a cab and transport me to my "lodgings!"

I was 12 years old, and a far-cry from the 12 year old of today! I still wore my hair in long curls, and my dresses were NOT grown-upish but child-like and was proper then. I was genuinely shy and naive, but, I was alert to every new sight, sound, and person. I was storing away memories.

Aunt Charlotte, left further instructions for my behavior AFTER I had arrived at the hotel. I was to take all meals in my room. And I was Not to be allowed to "run loose" in the lobby, as she put it. Nor was I to take a walk by myself, or, to "flit-off" to Central Park, and never be heard of again.

Every day some one of the staff, had to take me for a walk, (just like a dog!)...till my aunt's arrival. I did get one chance to eat at RUMPELMEYER'S, where all the rich ice-creams and luscious fudge sundaes were served. I stuffed myself and nearly got sick from too much sweet!!

Well, aunt did not arrive when she was supposed to! But, fore-sighted as usual, she beseeched the Captain, to send a Morse Code ship-to-shore (Hotel Plaza). He graciously complied. The ship was the same CARPATHIA...still in service 12 or 14 years

after the TITANIC sank. Long ago, my aunt had made friends with the Captain and always sailed on the CARPATHIA, if it coincided with her schedule.

Let it be known, in the early 1920s there was no TV, nor radio available for Hotel guests. That diversion was missing. As a child in a new strange place, I was anxious to get OUT and SEE things. I had a few books my aunt had selected...and some games I could play. But I loved looking out over Central Park, as it was still green, and leaves had not yet "turned". I liked the hansom cabs rolling along, pulled by sleek horses, and a man in a SILK HAT, Prince Albert coat, on the box. How I would love to ride in one! There was a carriage stand in front of the hotel...plus motor-taxis... Also...there was the telephone! I could call my mother and grandmother in Indianapolis. Never a thought as to how much it would add to my aunt's bill!!

When mother answered, her voice sounded so glad it was ME! I guess she worried some. She asked a lot of questions, before she got to: "Where's Lottie?"

"Oh, she isn't here yet!" I wanted to sound nonchalant.

"Not THERE? Oh, my goodness! What has happened? Tell me!" I could hear some confusion and noise...I continued on:

"What did you saaaay? Hello! WHAT???" More noise. My grandmother took the phone: "Your mother has just fainted! I've got to HANG UP AND TAKE CARE OF HER. Call you back later." The phone went dead before I could tell either of them, that I was all right...and my aunt had sent a message to the hotel...by MORSE CODE that the ship was late, because of a storm at sea. When Gran called back about an hour later, she asked more questions. I told her of the nice meals served in my room, but it would be nice to get out again. I told her aunt had promised to buy me some new clothes. Gran was terse.

"Tell her NOT to spend much on fancy dressing. You won't need it yet! This is the kind of school that does NOT like anything fancy. You need knowledge in your head, not clothes on your back! The clothes we bought you, are of the best, but just *PLAIN* as the school directed. Your mission is, to learn something from your books, and the teachers who instruct you. This will NOT be...a "trivia" place. When you finish there, you will be ready for the next step. And do NOT expect a bed of roses there! You must learn to look at FACTS, and thereby learn to sift out TRUTH. *Truth* is what you will be searching for. All your life, too! Never forget that!"

"Yes, m'am...I know I will be there to learn...and to remember WHAT I learn. But I learned something *here* already, that is new and easy. Better than before."

"Well, what *is it* you have learned, that is BETTER than before?"

"How to eat a banana, properly."

"Shucks!" my grandmother exclaimed, "You surely knew BEFORE how to eat everything. And, like a lady, too. A BANANA for Heaven's Sake! Tell me about it." So I did....

This waiter brings my breakfast in a little tin cart with a candle in it...so everything is nice and hot. Nice, like I was grown-up. The waiter is an older man, French I think, maybe 30-35."

"Hold on there!" Gran shouted. "What's his age got to do with your eating a banana?"

"Nothing, except I go through the meal like I was really in a restaurant. I walk to the table, stand by it...while he pulls-out the chair. I sit down. He takes the napkin from the table, and with a flourish...hands it to me. I place it in my lap. Then he sets a pretty little plate in front of me, with a banana on it, I pick it up and start to peel it back. Grandmother cuts-in:

"Since I am paying for this call, and you seem to be all right...I am going now."

Otherwise, I will have a big bill. I will just have to wait for you to write me about the banana! I love you. PLEASE try to take care of yourself. May nothing happen to you, or your mother would not be able to bear it. Bye, for now".

Anyway, this was a kind man and all he wanted was to teach me how to eat a banana, properly. Food is his world. I am part of that world, and should know the niceties of eating...as though it were a gourmet repast every day. As I picked up the banana and peeled it back, the peeling flapped over my hand.

"Oh, NO Ma'amselle! Non, non, NO! Not like that!" He removed the banana, put a fresh one on the plate.

"Here, I will show you HOW!" He cut it in half...leaving one half to demonstrate. With knife in right hand, he peeled back, leaving the fruit to be cut in tiny rings...keeping the whole thing together with his left hand. He puts down the fruit knife, picks up a fork...too spear each ring.

"Now, you take the fork and spear each ring, as you eat your cereal. This is easy and delicate, for a lady to do. The peeling, the slicing...the fork...the eating! Turn back the peelings, AFTER you have eaten the fruit. Use the napkin to wipe your mouth, gently. And now, the finger-bowl...tips only. Do NOT wash your hands! Wipe your fingers, leave the napkin unfolded, to the left of the plate. Now rise. I remove the chair. VOILA! You have learned to eat a banana, the proper way." He was busy placing used plates, cutlery and linen in a little "closet," under the cart.

"Mam'amselle, you will learn to do it deftly and beautifully for you have beautiful hands." He slowly rolled the cart to the door, where he paused to say...

"I was asked to tell you...your aunt will be here this morning. Then you and she will have lunch at one, in the restaurant. The Chef has been making something special for your aunt. You see he was in the kitchen of the CARPATHIA for many years, wanting to come to America, and never had a chance, until your aunt made so many crossings on that ship, enjoyed his delightful cuisine so much! He told her his ambition to live in America...give up boats. She told him:

"I can fix it! I know the very place for you...the Plaza Hotel in New York City. They will just LOVE you!" (And so they did!)

"Charles, the Chef here...is my brother. She found us BOTH a place. My duty to your aunt, is teaching you, how to eat a banana in a way that is easy and delicate. I hope you will always remember, Rene!" With a low bow, he and the little cart were gone. But, I have never forgotten the delightful manner he used, to correct my table errors. Especially the method he taught me long ago. I still eat and enjoy bananas, done his way...with expert ease and gratification, in....

HOW TO EAT A BANANA, PROPERLY!!!!!!